

# REASON SIX

## Utah's Film Industry

### "Lights, Camera, Action"

By Janine S. Creager



Marshall D. Moore director of the Utah Film Commission describes the role and purpose of the organization using a simple story. Utah producers Adam Abel and Ryan Little were scouting locations for their film "Outlaw Trail" and were having a difficult time finding a cave that could work in the film. "The challenge was to find not only a cave that was visually pleasing, but also accessible with trucks and equipment" said Marshall Moore. "When they realized the task was becoming difficult they contacted our office for assistance, their timing was in harmony with a visiting production company from Los Angeles that had the same dilemma and had decided to build a cave from scratch in a warehouse in Salt Lake City. Our office was able to connect the filmmakers and a deal was made to purchase the cave and then move the pieces to American Fork where "Outlaw Trail" was being filmed. This solution was pleasing to both the producers of Outlaw Trail and the Producers of "Unearthed" who were just days away from putting the cave set in a dumpster." This is a great example of how our office can help film production, and save them money."

#### IF YOU PAY IT, THEY WILL COME

In the mid 1990s, Utah was one of the top five states in the country for on-location filming. But when Canada began offering financial incentives and rebates to production teams, the crews—and dollars—flew northward.

"Around 2000, the film industry took a severe hit [when Canadian] governments were giving huge rebates to come film there," says Don Schain, Emmy-awarding winning producer of the Disney film, "High School Musical," which was shot in Utah. Schain has produced a total of 18 films for Disney, as well as working on Hayek's film, "The Maldonado Miracle," and "The World's Fastest Indian," starring Anthony Hopkins.

"After three or four years," he continues, "a lot of states started offering rebates to lure films back," including Utah, which is now one of 44 states

to offer incentives to entice production crews back to the state. "It was important to get Utah into the rebate game," Schain says.

Incentives are paid out after the production crews have wrapped up filming, and are based on a percentage of the amount spent while in the state. The Motion Picture Association of Utah (MPAU), of which Schain currently serves as president, estimates that for every dollar paid out of the incentive fund, almost \$15 comes back into state coffers. The primary goal of the MPAU is to lobby the Legislature for those funds.

Last year the state paid out incentives on seven motion pictures. In the recent legislative session, the state of Utah allocated \$4 million to the Motion Picture Incentive Fund (MPIF) up from \$1 million the previous year. Film projects can receive a 15% rebate of the money spent in Utah, up to \$500,000. With these incentives, the state has been able to bring many production crews to Utah, and the demand for the region is growing. Both "High School

Musical" and the sequel have been primarily shot in Utah. Calls come in regularly inquiring about locations and incentives.

"Money talks," says Moore. "I would like to see us sustain a strong incentive package that we can keep companies coming year round. We're training a lot of film professionals here. We know our market."

The current increase in good news about Utah film opportunities can be traced in part to the popularity of "High School Musical," a film which exceeded all expectations. An exploding franchise industry including film-related merchandise, CDs, DVDs, rights to school productions of the musical have all brought positive attention to the state in a way that has helped Utah's film industry at large. The state has even fielded requests from national and international tourists to visit Salt Lake's East High School where many scenes were filmed.

"It's like a huge, giant billboard that we don't have to pay for," says Moore.



Even with the phenomenal success of the first film, however, the state almost lost the sequel to the Disney hit because of a lack of incentives. That's when the Film Commission shifted into high gear.

"We showed them creatively some things that they could do," explains Moore. "High School Musical



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**Adam Abel**  
FILM PRODUCER

2" with Don Schain again at the production helm, is currently in production in the state and will be broadcast on the Disney Channel this summer.

#### EXTENDING A HELPING HAND

The Utah film Commission was formed in 1974 as a program of what is now the Governor's Office of Economic Development, and is a member of the Association of Film Commissioners International (AFCI). Through backing by the commission, potential film producers and crews can receive assistance through every phase of production. The website, [www.film.utah.gov](http://www.film.utah.gov), includes a photo gallery that offers a glimpse of the diversity of locations available throughout the state, in addition to information about permits, regulations and incentives.

"The film commission provides a lot of resources and connections to the film industry. They are very responsive, and tapped into what we need," says producer Adam Abel.

Once companies determine they would like to explore the state further, they can submit a manuscript to the commission for review. From there, the plot and story line are carefully examined to find ways the state can assist in bringing the script to life. Moore understands that not every script that is submitted will result in a film being made in the state. But, due to the fact that 80 percent of the film industry in the state is repeat clients, he also knows that any goodwill generated by the commission's efforts will pay off in the long run.

#### WHY UTAH?

This goodwill generated by financial incentives, easily accessible resources and word of mouth aren't the only motivators in bringing film crews to the state. Don Schain came to Utah 15 years ago when the larger parent company with which he was associated, Leucadia International,

asked him to be a part of a small Utah-based film division. His reasons for coming, and for staying, mirror the motivations of many film crews today: close proximity to Los Angeles, as well as a diversity of scenic locations that have been used to duplicate everything from Antarctica, shot at Strawberry Reservoir for the film "National Treasure," to an island beach shore located on the Bonneville Salt Flats in the upcoming film "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End."

And when it comes to availability of film crews, equipment and support services such as hotel and catering companies, Moore says, "Utah has one of the deepest infrastructures—the film crews are considered one of the best outside of New York and Los Angeles. They are a good incentive."

Abel, known for his work on such films as "Saints and Soldiers," "The Outlaw Trail," and his upcoming project, "Forever Strong," agrees with these elements and the fact that Utah is a non-union state which means fewer complications due to bureaucracy and red tape.

With so many advantages, some might wonder if Utah is too good to be true when it comes to the film industry. When asked about possible disadvantages to filming in the state, Don Schain pauses only briefly before saying, "I don't think I've found any. The average person thinks of film as entertainment, but it is very much a business. It is good for the economy of the state."

"The productions speak for themselves," adds Abel of his experience in the state. "I hear fellow filmmakers. They have nothing but good to say about Utah."



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